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ABSTRACT

The Family Support Act of 1988 is based on the assumption that education, training, work experience, and support are the way to reduce welfare dependence. The Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training program in the act requires participation of many welfare recipients in state job training programs. Comprehensive welfare reform programs in California (Greater Avenues to Independence) and Massachusetts (Employment and Training CHOICES) have had some success, but the needs for basic skill remediation and a healthy economy for job placement cannot be matched in all states. Results of these and other programs in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Ohio, Florida, and New Jersey underscore the importance of a primary focus on long-term educational rather than short-term goals as well as the danger of rhetoric that attributes educational/employment problems to lack of motivation or abdication of parental responsibilities. A basic flaw continues to be the lack of data on education-welfare links. (A listing of questions for the media to focus on concentrates on the capacity of the education system to gear up to improve the literacy of those on welfare. Addresses and telephone numbers are provided for seven resources in the area of linking welfare and education.) (CML)

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MYTH #9:

LITERACY IS THE TICKET OUT OF WELFARE

Some assumptions about the worth of higher levels of literacy to helping the poor get off welfare will come home to roost over the next few years--in every state.

The welfare reform legislation passed by Congress this fall, known as the Family Support Act of 1988, is based on these assumptions. It says that the way off the welfare rolls is through more education, training, and work experience, with appropriate interim supports. The premises fit with an evolving societal view about welfare. They represent values that are neither liberal nor conservative; rather, they are pragmatic and derived from the experience of individual states with recent welfare reform demonstrations. If the premises are correct, the education sector will play a central role in reducing welfare dependence.

The problems that should be investigated have to do more with whether or not education can handle the job it is being given. And how the public will know.

Tracking the implementation of the new welfare program means that reporters and editors will need to break out of traditional divisions of coverage. Reporting on the intersection of two bureaucracies--welfare and education--requires knowing about both of them and how they fit together.

Behind the Reforms

When President Franklin Roosevelt proposed the Social Security Act to Congress in 1935, only two lines of his address referred to a new program, Aid to Dependent Children. It was intended to be a temporary bridge program, directed primarily at widows with children, helping such families until a Survivors' Insurance program was well established. It became, instead, a road of its own, welfare as we know it today.

The major reason this Depression-era effort grew and changed is because the character of American families changed. According to the National Governors' Association Task Force on Welfare Prevention, death of a spouse accounts for only 3 percent of single parent families today; divorce, 68 percent; separation, 8 percent; and illegitimacy, 20 percent.

Statistics about those who are receiving welfare dramatize these changes. For example, in 1969, 28 percent of AFDC adults were never married; in 1986, that figure had climbed to 46 percent. The number who were widows dropped from 6 percent to 2 percent in the same time period. Without improved economic stability for these changing families, said NGA last year, from one-fourth to one-third of children could expect to be on welfare sometime before the age of 18. In recent years, mothers and children have tended to stay on the welfare rolls longer, and, experience shows, if a family does not move off of welfare within two years, chances are much greater that the family will still be on welfare 10 years hence.

Various efforts to move AFDC from a "dead-end" system that supports dependence to one that encourages self-sufficiency litter White House and Congressional archives. There have been incremental changes. A Work Incentive (WIN) program initiated in 1971 formally endorsed efforts to move welfare recipients into the workforce. In 1981 the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act

Upcoming Issues . . .

Technology, prisons, the military, state action, the workplace, and English-as-a-second-language are some of the future topics for *The Literacy Beat*. If there are other issues which you would like to see covered, let us know. Contact Lisa Walker or Anne Lewis at (202) 429-9680.

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allowed states to experiment with welfare policies--as a trade off for reduced funding. Many of the features of the welfare reform act are based on the experiences of states in requiring, for example, training or work in return for welfare support.

What is known from these experiments says little about the effects of education. Preliminary reports of a five-year study of state efforts funded by the Ford Foundation indicate most of the efforts went into job counseling or actual work experience; education was not an important component.

The most recent research report on a demonstration similar to the aims of welfare reform gives scant attention to education as a factor in the success of the participants. Project Redirection, developed by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, provided comprehensive services for disadvantaged teenage mothers. On the basis of five years' data, education attainment was the only component of the program not affected. Only a few of the young mothers expressed interest in educational goals. However, their incomes were higher than a control group, and their children were doing better in school.

In two states, however, welfare reform programs tried to be comprehensive, and they helped set the pattern for Congressional action.

GAIN and ET

GAIN, or Greater Avenues for Independence, is California's welfare reform program. AFDC recipients, under individualized plans, must participate in education, job search, or training programs that result in unsubsidized employment. Child care and transportation are provided, if necessary. (Contact: James Morgan; (516) 445-0194.)

At the time the program was adopted in 1985, California officials estimated that 15 percent of AFDC recipients required to participate (those with children under age six) would need education services. The experience through 1987 makes it obvious that this was a serious underestimate. Less than one-half of the state's counties were participating in GAIN through 1987. In these counties, 67 percent of the current AFDC recipients and 57 percent of AFDC applicants needed education services. (Los Angeles County, which has the highest proportion of AFDC recipients, was not included among the first participating counties.)

The total education cost went from an estimated $16 million to $152 million. Because of the unexpected size of the caseload, the cost of education services per individual tripled from a 1986 estimate of $612 per participant to a 1988 estimate of $1,967 per participant, according to a report by the Center for Law and Social Policy.

California lawmakers, it seems, had assumed the schools could take on the added services without any additional funding. At the community college level, administrators found that the GAIN program increased their costs for paperwork, counseling, tutoring and administration.

The experience of GAIN participants in community college programs was good. More had completed high school or a GED than other AFDC enrollees or community college students in general; their academic records were better than average in the community college courses. However, community college officials were reluctant to take on the GAIN enrollees under a contract plan which evaluates programs on the basis of job placement because they doubted there were enough jobs available at adequate salaries.

The GAIN experience, according to the Center for Law and Social Policy, leads to several questions on education policy:

- Effective programs to educate AFDC recipients will cost money and require new funds for states, school districts and community colleges. With limited resources, states may have to target education programs.
- The needs for basic literacy and math skills are considerably understated, extending to many who have completed high school and are particularly acute in states with high numbers of non-English speaking populations.
- Remedial education will need to be a priority, if the purpose of the program is to ready AFDC recipients for competition in the marketplace. If job searches are given higher priority than education, for example, the participants may wind up in low-paying jobs and never get the education they need. (continued on page 4)

EDUCATION FEATURES OF THE FAMILY SUPPORT ACT

The Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) program of the Family Support Act requires:

o Within two years, each state will offer a JOBS program, preferably statewide, under a plan approved by the Department of Health and Human Services.

o Services must be coordinated with programs under the Departments of Labor and Education.

o The program can be administered through a state's welfare agency or, by contract, through state and local educational agencies and the Job Training Partnership Act networks.

o Exempt from participation are parents of children under age 3, or a state may set the minimum age at 1; a child under age 16 or presently enrolled in school, or a person employed more than 30 hours a week.

o A state may not require participation of a parent with a child under age 6 if day care is not available.

o States must require participation of young parents under the age of 22 who have not completed high school in programs at high schools or the equivalent, in remedial education or English-as-a-second-language regardless of the age of their child/children.

o If a welfare recipient already is attending a full-time education program, this will satisfy the requirements; no additional federal funding will be available for education, but costs of day care necessary for attending school may be reimbursed.

o Those who refuse to participate in the education or jobs programs would have their welfare payments channeled through a third party.

o For those under 20 for whom a regular high school program would be inappropriate, the state must provide alternative education programs. If an AFDC recipient does not make progress, alternative work or training programs can be substituted, up to 20 hours a week.

o For those over 20 without a high school diploma, education services must be provided unless the individual demonstrates a "basic literacy level" or the employment goal of the individual does not require a high school diploma or equivalent. "Education services must be consistent with an individual's employment goals," says the law.

o Children of AFDC families must be encouraged to participate in any suitable education or training programs available through JOBS, as long as they don't interfere with school attendance and to the extent that programs and resources are available.

o Child care must be guaranteed.

(House provisions for state grants to train child care personnel to develop quality programs in day care and to expand the number of slots were deleted from the final bill in the conference committee.)

(from page 2)

o Education alone will not guarantee a place in the job market.

o Education programs must include all affected agencies in the planning to avoid conflict and provide accurate estimates of the cost of the services.

The other state with a documented track record on welfare reform is **Massachusetts**. Its Employment and Training (ET) CHOICES program offers AFDC and state general relief recipients an array of choices among services--career planning, skills training, education, job placement services and on-the-job training. It provides support services, and day care is available for up to 12 months after a participant goes off the welfare rolls.

The state program contracts with other state agencies to provide services, such as education; some postsecondary education is available through tuition vouchers. An unusual twist to the contracting is that it is performance-based; education agencies, for example, receive only partial funding for participants enrolled in GED or ESL courses. Full payment comes when the person gets a job. The clear message, say ET officials, is that the goal is employment, a task made easier by the state's robust economy. (Contact: Virginia Melendez, assistant commissioner for employment and training; (617) 574-0200.)

Those whose employers do not offer health insurance (25 percent) can participate in a program offering health benefits, also for up to 12 months after leaving welfare.

Since the program started in 1983, more than 43,000 welfare recipients have found employment through ET; 86 percent were still off welfare a year after leaving the welfare system. The Massachusetts program builds on some advantages not found elsewhere or in the base of the new federal legislation--it is voluntary, and the state's economy offers good job opportunities. Further, according to a review of several books/reports on welfare reform by Andrew Hacker in *The New York Review*, 64 percent of the welfare mothers participating in the program have completed high school, compared to a national average of 51 percent among AFDC recipients.

Experiences of Other States with Education/Welfare

Wisconsin, with a waiver from the federal government, adopted changes in its welfare program last year to require AFDC recipients who are minor parents or who are teenagers between the ages of 13-19 to attend school regularly in order to continue to receive full AFDC benefits. The implementation was gradual, applying to 13-14-year-olds last May and older students starting in September. The first sanctions were imposed in November. The plan is being challenged in court.

According to a study by the Center for Law and Public Policy, Wisconsin education officials were willing to serve the individualized needs of young welfare recipients, but "they questioned their readiness to deliver prompt and appropriate services to learnfare students." No agency, it was pointed out, had reliable estimates as to the number of students and types/costs of programs that would be involved.

As the implementation was developing, according to the center's study, little attention was being given to coordination of services between welfare and education, and the governor had omitted provisions for evaluation of the programs. Welfare advocates were beginning to view the program as "aimed more at a short-term reduction of welfare expenditures than a long-term reduction of dependency." (Contact: Camille Stephen; (608) 266-1212.)

Other states where education and welfare have been linked and which might provide some data or hindsight:

o **Minnesota** -- minor parents on AFDC must attend regular high school or participate in an alternative educational program leading to a diploma, if their child is at least six weeks old. Child care and transportation must be provided. At the same time, the state made high school attendance mandatory until age 18 and permitted attendance up to age 21. (Contact: Sandra Gardebing, (612) 296-2701.)

o **Ohio** -- Project Learn, to go into effect in September 1989, will require all minor parents on AFDC to attend high

school, a GED program or a vocational program. The state will expand its GRADS program, a vocational offering that also includes family life education, nutrition and family planning. A teen parent in Project Learn with excessive absences or who drops out will face a $62 a month reduction in welfare payments; each month the teen parent meets the attendance requirement, he/she will receive a $62 bonus. (Contact: Ann Harnish; (614) 466-7781.)

o **Florida** -- welfare recipients age 14-20 have a learnfare program, Project Independence. Participants can satisfy work requirements by attending high school or an alternative educational program for at least 30 hours a week. (Contact: Jim Clark; (904) 487-2380.)

o **New Jersey** -- An experimental program in Newark and Camden mandates AFDC applicants under 20 with only one child to enroll in school or in job training. The youth are given individual attention and provided with supplemental services, such as after-school parenting workshops. (Contact: Ray Castro; (609) 292-6090.)

What Has Been Learned?

Staff attorney Josie Foehrenbach of the Center for Law and Social Policy, who has conducted much of the research on "learnfare" programs among the states, comes to some conclusions useful to reporters. Education should be the primary focus of such programs, not sanctions against young welfare recipients, she emphasizes. Existing programs have a common flaw--"they too often appear to have been formulated with an eye only toward superficial short-term goals instead of concentrating on the capacities of current educational and social service agencies to serve targeted students and actually redress students' learning problems."

By concentrating on a rhetoric that attributes the educational problems of young welfare recipients to their lack of motivation and abdication of parental responsibility, the program could become punitive rather than helpful. "This experiment's negative potential stems from its tendency to oversimplify poor students' educational situation and to avoid institutional reform issues," she says.

A basic flaw discovered in reviewing the literature on education/welfare links for this issue of *The Literacy Beat* is the lack of data. The Ford Foundation study of state efforts at welfare reform, being conducted by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, will not be completed until 1992. The new federal program begins to take effect in 1990.

Several sources cite the lack of education of AFDC recipients (Andrew Hacker; the Children's Defense Fund). However, the latest statistical report available from the Department of Health and Human Services (1986 AFDC recipients) says that information on the years of education of those on welfare is unavailable for almost 60 percent of participants. Ten states know the educational attainment of less than 10 percent of their AFDC families; California and New York, with the highest number on the welfare rolls, have such information on less than 20 percent of AFDC families, according to HHS.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

At this stage, most questions from the media probably should focus on the capacity of the education system to gear up to improve the literacy of those on welfare.

o What information on educational needs is available; how are these needs being determined/estimated?

o Are the welfare and education systems planning together?

o Are there programs at the local or state levels which provide results and data from experiences in melding welfare and education together?

o Are estimates of needs taking all aspects of education for these families into consideration, e.g. supply of bilingual teachers and counselors, alternative school settings, office support staff needs, evaluation of programs?

o Are the needs of long-term welfare recipients being considered separately from estimates and program development and/or costs?

o How will education costs be determined?

o What is the current experience of welfare recipients with regard to education? When did they drop out and why; if they have completed high school, what are the further education barriers? Did they attempt to go back to school before?

o How will child care provisions be carried out? One estimate says an additional 1.5 million day care slots will be needed. (Most experts point out that children of the poor need special programs through the day care system, requiring comprehensive services, trained personnel and other quality elements. However, Andrew Hacker estimates that the federal contribution for day care under the welfare reform bill will come to no more than $6 a day--hardly enough for a quality program.)

o If AFDC recipients without high school diplomas are to be exempted from education programs provided they have a certain level of basic literacy, what is that level to be and who will determine it?

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